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Challenging the conventions of personal correspondence: txtng times for literacy snobs

Abstract:

Changes in the way we produce, consume and distribute personal communication are subtly mediating new perceptions about communication appropriateness and literacy. While not denying that ideational content is an important carrier of meaning, this paper argues that it is the changing material composition of screen based (as opposed to paper based) personal correspondence that is challenging traditional perceptions. It outlines two methodological perspectives that allow us to compare personal correspondence, such as a letter written on paper, with a text or a tweet. It then compares several different examples of personal correspondence from pre-digital and digital times in order to show how our perceptions of what constitutes effective, appropriate and literate personal correspondence are changing, and to show that the conventions around the personal textual communication of traditional letters were just a highly formalised genre – a set of snobberies shaped by the unique materialities of the literacy tools of the day.

Biographical note:

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Introduction

Text has been used for building and maintaining interpersonal relationships since literacy became widespread. We have written surreptitious notes to schoolmates, declared our love on banners slung behind aeroplanes, graffitied walls and scrawled illegible postcards. Our own experience, and readily available statistics, clearly show that the conventions of written interpersonal communication are changing rapidly as it is increasingly being conducted on screen via email, Facebook, Twitter or text messages.

I recently found an attractive A5 greeting card sent to me by a friend at the turn of the century. It was carefully constructed: handwritten on stiff, folded white card, with a glossy coloured photograph of beautiful flowers from her garden carefully glued to the front. On rereading this card I was struck by how, in the space of 13 years, so much had changed about our methods and expectations of personal correspondence. My friend had used a formal salutation 'Dearest Chris and Pip', set the letter out in clearly structured paragraphs, and had given a full and carefully ordered account of her life including comments about the weather, her garden, the lives of her children and news of mutual friends. Towards the end of the card she enquired about our lives, with informed queries about our children – thereby specifically maintaining continuity from my previous card to her. She concluded with 'Lots of love and hugs, Anne'. Auspiciously, in the opening paragraph, she mentioned that her family had recently purchased a computer. This card was the last piece of paper based correspondence I ever received from this friend. All subsequent communication has been via emails and texts. In the short period of 13 years this card has become remarkable.

More recently the girlfriend of a well-known New Zealand rugby player announced their engagement on Twitter. She tweeted, 'This years gonna be manic, I can feel it already! Yeeyaaaa, ma boys are gonna rock it!' ('Third time lucky' 2011). This was published in the *New Zealand Herald* to the smug bemusement of its readers. This paper claims that, contrary to the perception of these *Herald* readers, text and Twitter messages such as the tweet above are examples of competent, skilled social interaction that is deftly tailored to its audience. In other words, the popular perception of what it means to be literate is a modernist, print-oriented construct, and personal correspondence conducted via texts, Twitter, email and Facebook is valid, effective, literate communication. This is an intellectually challenging concept for those amongst us who perceive text and tweets as crude, impulsive, badly punctuated, poorly spelt, grammatically flawed communication produced by ill-educated communicators.

Literacy: a modernist, print oriented construct

The term literacy traditionally applied exclusively to writing and reading using the alphabetic system, but changes in communication media have brought the recognition that new literacies are needed to communicate in a multi-media world. This has led to increasingly insistent calls to include non-linguistic literacies such as visual literacy

(Giorgis et al. 1999), information literacy (Lupton 2004) and digital literacy (Littlejohn, Beetham & McGill 2012) in formal literacy programmes. Regardless of the various perceptions that educationalists, sociologists and historians apply to literacy, it is a potent metaphor in the popular imagination, associated with mastery of the skills that are strongly connected with the improvement of an individual's life, and the preservation and advancement of civilized society.

An indication of the depth of feeling around the term literacy can be seen in the 'literacy crisis' that most Western countries experience every few years. These literacy crises are associated with the 'back to basics' movement and the general perception that too much time is spent on the liberal, intellectual aspects of education when what learners really need are the skills of reading and writing (and arithmetic) in order to prepare themselves for the workforce. When, in 2006, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority decreed that students could use 'txt' language in exams there was widespread public outrage (Smith 2006). The tenor of the public discussion was that this innovation represented an erosion in educational standards, and was a clear indication that New Zealand was fast becoming a Third World country.

Kress calls for a broadening of our ideas about what constitutes effective literacy. He believes that we (human beings) are naturally adaptive 'language makers' who, through social interaction, will use whatever tools are available to us (for example, paper, room decoration and clothes) to communicate with others (1997, 2010). Kress challenges the popular notion that literacy is a static set of skills that students must master. He claims that this common perception of literacy was a direct consequence of the era of print and its associated production, distribution and consumption cycles which channelled communication into rigid, formalised sequences, and which were rigorously enforced by our education system.

The tools of literacy such as reading and writing were, for many years, perceived to be epistemologically neutral. In other words, these tools were perceived to merely record and transmit meaning without influencing it. Seminal critical theorists (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977, Street 1995, Williams 1983) challenge this, arguing that our perceptions of what is good or poor literacy are shaped by social agreement and, as such, can never be epistemologically (or ideologically) neutral. Therefore our beliefs about what constitutes good literacy are always compatible with the agreements that have been reached by the members of the group that we belong to (or aspire to belong to). The conventions we use are not part of the natural order of the world, rather a series of control and gate-keeping mechanisms which are subtle markers of class, education and taste.

Underlying all considerations of literacy is the idea that it involves mastery of the communication tools of the age (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977, Kress 1997, Street 1995, Williams 1983). Speaking requires no extra tools; we are born with the necessary equipment to achieve communication through speech. But inscription requires tools – pen, paper and the alphabetic system being the most basic of these (Williams). Learning to master these tools has been the central focus of our education system. It is through the

lens of changing literacy tools that this paper examines some of the changes occurring in our perceptions of literacy and challenges the notion that the impulsive, frequently abbreviated, informal communication occurring today on social media platforms is ‘low’ literacy.

A comparative theoretical framework for perceiving literacy

This paper uses two theoretical perspectives: multimodality (Jewitt 2008, Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001) and media ecology (McLuhan 1994, Poster 2007, Ong 1982) to examine how the changing materiality of our communication tools is subtly mediating new perceptions about appropriateness in personal correspondence.

Multimodal discourse analysis claims that the unique semiotic properties (modal composition) of our communication tools influences our epistemological agreements about the world (Jewitt 2008, Kress & van Leeuwen 2001). When we communicate we make meaning not only through language but also unconsciously through a range of semiotic channels (modes) such as sound, image, touch, smell and colour (depending on what is available). This has long been recognised in spoken communication where it is readily acknowledged that language (such as choice of words) and non-verbal cues (such as accent and gesture) all contribute to the overall meaning, but the multimodal nature of written communication has only recently been acknowledged. For example, when we read a paper-based letter we unconsciously respond to the sensory experience of the style of handwriting, the crossings out, the competence (or incompetence) of the grammar and spelling, the weight of the stock, the promptness of the response, and the smell of the paper. These modes of meaning all reveal extensive, often unconscious information about the author and the author’s rhetorical intentions. While there are residual similarities, screen-based personal correspondence has a different modal configuration from paper-based personal correspondence. An analysis of these modal differences allows us to speculate how this altered modal reconfiguration is changing our unconscious sensory experience and subtly influence our agreements about what constitutes appropriate (literate) communication.

Another theoretical perspective that sheds light on changing communication values is media ecology (McLuhan 1994, Poster 2007, Ong 1982). According to a media ecology perspective, the medium of print has profoundly shaped Western epistemology because the particular rules and conventions of print result in a ‘total configurational awareness’ (McLuhan 1994: 7) which moulds our modes of cognition, our social structures and our institutions. In his claim that the medium is the message, McLuhan stated that the changing materiality of our knowledge tools unconsciously changes how we think and communicate to a far greater extent than our conscious consideration of the ideational content. McLuhan wrote that every ‘culture and age has its favourite model of perception and knowledge that it is inclined to prescribe for everybody and everything’ (13), and that the favoured model of perception and knowledge is shaped by the dominant technology of the time. According to McLuhan, in the age of mechanical industry (including the

printing press) the ‘private outlook’ was the natural mode of expression whereas the electronic age is heralding an emerging world view of ‘wholeness, empathy and depth of awareness’ and a ‘revulsion against imposed patterns’ (13).

Ong also claims that our beliefs are shaped by much more than the ideational context of texts, and that the form shapes both the meaning and what we perceive as valuable knowledge (1982). Ong analyses the transition from an oral culture to a chirographic (written) culture and to a typographic (print) culture, and the powerful impact these transitions in form have on human consciousness. For example, he claims that in an oral society, coming to know about something means achieving ‘close, empathetic, communal identification with the known’ (46), that oral societies lack the elaborate analytic categories that are evident in typographic societies, and that writing has the effect of structuring knowledge at a distance from lived experience.

Central to these theorists is the idea that our perceptions of the world – the values we place upon the world – are a result of ‘the *mutual* shaping of tool and practice’ (Vygotsky 1962: 147). The term ‘tool’ often implies something mechanically manipulated by a human agent, but a media ecology approach examines tools (in this case literacy tools) from a two-way perspective: not only do the physical properties of our literacy tools shape our ‘patterned practices’ (Poster 1994), but our ‘patterned practices’ shape our traditions, which in turn shape our agreements about what is good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate. For example, until recently the medium of paper was seen as a neutral carrier of meaning. As we move from paper to screen we are able to compare and reflect how the unique material properties of paper-based literacy tools, and their associated production, consumption and distribution cycles have had a powerful impact on our perceptions the appropriateness of text-based personal communication.

Changing tools – changing literacy rules

It is increasingly clear that modal changes are occurring in our literacy tools as people correspond on screen rather than on paper. These changes are influencing our perceptions about what is considered to be appropriate and literate personal correspondence.

There are a number of residual similarities between paper-based and screen-based personal correspondence. Both forms of communication involve humans making and exchanging socially agreed signs using alpha-numeric code; neither use non-verbal or oral communication; in both the sender and receiver are not physically present; in both the producer of the text is reaching out to fulfill some social function such as informing, delighting, commiserating or persuading; and in both the writer has made a series of rhetorical compositional and editorial choices (for example, some information is chosen and some is omitted, and some details are emphasised and some are minimised).

While these similarities exist, it is also clear that there is an increasing number of subtle differences in the form of paper-based and screen-based written social communication. These differences are emerging, not as a result of deficiencies in literacy skills amongst

the correspondents, but as a result of the altered modal composition between paper and screen, and the consequent altered agreements about what constitutes appropriate communication.

A key factor that is contributing to changing notions of appropriateness in personal correspondence is changing access to the tools of literacy – the ease of production and dissemination of screen-based personal correspondence is allowing a new demographic group to bypass established conventions and the rigorous control of the education system. A Stanford University study found that the 2005–2008 cohort of undergraduates and first year graduates wrote more than any generation before it, because the students socialised online using text (Keller 2009). There are clear indications that these emerging groups of writers are communicating using decentralised networks on screens rather than paper, and that the digital environment is fast becoming the norm for writing. According to Kress, those who have access to the tools of literacy are the ones who will ultimately decide what we mean by ‘good literacy’ because ‘no degree of power can act against the socially transformative force of interaction’ (2010: 27). In other words, new groups are defining what is appropriate. They clearly have not read the manuals that discuss where and when it is appropriate to write ‘on to’ as ‘onto’, or the dictionaries that say it is inarguably wrong to spell ‘judgment’ as ‘judgement’. Nor do they appear to care that ‘years’ (see the example above) is supposed to have an apostrophe. In the screen-based written interpersonal communication environment, such discussions are considered to be increasingly arbitrary and pedantic.

A clear indication of the changing values in personal correspondence is the increasing disregard for the traditional, rigorously established conventions of letter writing. Paper-based personal correspondence has traditionally been rigorously controlled by well established style guidelines and endorsed by our education system. For example, one style manual states:

If you are writing to an ordinary person who is much older than you are, or of superior rank, it is respectful to use a prefix like Mr., Mrs., Ms’ and ‘In personal letters the salutation could begin with Dear or My Dear. Note that My Dear expresses more intimacy and affection than Dear. The subscription could be Sincerely Yours, Yours, or Yours Affectionately. Many people also write ‘Love’, ‘See you’ or ‘Cheers’. Note that ‘Love’ is not usually used in letters written by a man to another man (Venolia 1995).

Knowing and applying the correct form has traditionally been a mark of education, trustworthiness and legitimacy. It is increasingly clear, however, that the participants in screen-based personal correspondence have never read these manuals and have no intention of reading them. New correspondents are rebelling against these fixed ideas of etiquette and making their own agreements about, for example, how to appropriately begin and conclude a letter.

The changing modal affordances and constraints of screen-based personal correspondence are contributing to an increasing disregard for one of the key conventions of literacy: spelling. Historians tell us that in medieval times, prior to the formalising

influence of the printing press, individualised spellings were the norm. Eisenstein wrote that ‘correct’ (standard) English is no more than a convention because standard English was once a local dialect which became authorised when it was, rather randomly, selected as the basis for religious texts and official documents (1979). For centuries, our education system has rigorously endorsed the notion that there is a correct way to spell a word and that conforming to this correct way is a requirement for effective communication. However changes in literacy tools are bringing about a reassessment of this claim. For example, small keypads on mobile phones are not only difficult to input text into but frequently limit the number of characters that can be used. These constraints are leading to the acceptance of a commonly used shorthand which is increasingly normalising the omission of vowels and the use of abbreviations such as ‘wot?’, ‘wen?’ and initialisms such as ‘FYI’ and ‘OMG’. These practices, originally particularly noticeable in texting and Tweeting, are becoming increasingly acceptable amongst even the most literally ‘competent’ communicators and are finding their way into all forms of written screen-based communication. Consequently there is an increasingly casual attitude to spelling, an increasing sense of freedom from constraint, and permission to play with the conventions without embarrassment.

Our literacy tools shape what we perceive as skill or expertise (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977, Street 1995). Until recently the ability to spell (and the associated ability to access spelling’s adjunct tool, the dictionary) was considered an essential communication skill. Whatever the dictionary said was considered to be correct and any deviation from that was absolutely wrong (Katz 1998). The idea of making up new words was bizarre and the thought of using slang such as ‘gonna’ or ‘spazzing’ was considered highly inappropriate. In screen-based personal correspondence the ability to spell is now losing its prestige as a marker of literacy competence. Words are increasingly spelt using Americanisations, phonetic variations and amalgamations. New words such as ‘obseletized’, ‘Google’ (as a verb), ‘bling’ and ‘biodiesel’ are appearing in screen based communication before they are formally listed in any dictionary. Abbreviated company names, for example ‘Vodafone’ and ‘Xtra’, now seem funky and creative spellings, which interpreters of the communication take pleasure in deciphering. Instead of being viewed as cutting corners or sloppy, this is seen as creative. There is an increasing acceptance of the individual’s right and ability to actively play with the conventions of spelling.

One of the most significant factors influencing the acceptability of less prescribed forms of screen-based written interpersonal communication is that, unlike paper-based communication, it is reconstituted at the point of reception. New Zealand Post recently speculated that within five years the amount of mail it delivers through the traditional postal network will have halved since 2002 (Mason & Bennett 2013). Although much of this mail is business communication, this statistic also reflects the fact that it is no longer the norm for the original artefact to be physically carried by post or courier to its destination. Instead it is reconstituted on the receiver’s screen. This reconstitution crucially alters the artefact’s unique modal capacity for rhetorical meaning-making because it reduces the producer’s ability to control the artefact’s appearance at the point

of reception. For example, while some residual conventions such as upper case and lower case can be guaranteed to be accurately conveyed from sender to receiver, modal features such as layout, margin size, font and colour are all dependent on the particular specifications of the receiver's screen. If, as is increasingly the case, the recipient's screen is a hand-held Blackberry or iPhone, the appearance of the reconstituted text will be very different from the original. Therefore devoting time to establishing a sense of visual proportion and choosing an aesthetically appropriate font is becoming increasingly pointless. This loss of control over the final appearance of the communication is contributing to a devaluation of the significance of form and aesthetics.

As discussed above, Ong claimed that the move from an oral society to an inscription based society has had a profound impact on human consciousness (1982). He speculated that the move towards using electronic technology as our primary medium for communication would bring about a 'secondary orality' which includes many of the elements of primary orality but incorporates the recording and dissemination potentials of writing. According to Ong, one feature of this emerging secondary orality is that the communicator is no longer expected to explicitly articulate contextual information. This is a residual feature of oral, high-context societies where the physical proximity of the communicators meant that the context was implicitly mutually constructed (Hofstede 2005, Ong). In screen-based personal correspondence much of the shared contextual information is assumed. When the excited fiancée tweeted 'This years gonna be manic, I can feel it already! Yeeyaaa, ma boys are gonna rock it!' (Third time lucky 2011), the fact that we had no background information about her particular situation was of limited significance. The statement stands alone and interpreters of that text seem more than happy to accept it at face value.

Ong also speculated that electronic communication would increasingly use communication that was direct and situated in the present (1982) – much like in oral societies. From a media ecology perspective, changes in communication practices can always be traced back to changes in the physical form of the communication medium. An example of this is the changing dimensions of the writing pad (a convention originally inherited from the material proportions of the printing press). The dimensions of the pad contributed to a sense of what was considered to be the appropriate form and length of a social letter. Large blank areas on the page were considered wasteful and somehow coarse. It was perceived as appropriate to fill these blank spaces with extraneous material such as amusing stories about one's adventures or general discussion about the weather or the garden. These social fillers were recognised as adjunct information that did not necessarily contribute to the main meaning of the message, but there was general agreement that formal, ample introductions and conclusions were appropriate, and that brevity was crude. Today, however, as personal correspondence is reconstituted on smaller screens, the writer is forced to be more succinct. This is contributing to a stripping away of background details and increasing acceptance of the idea that direct access to the main point unencumbered by social niceties is perfectly acceptable.

As the standardised conventions of writing incorporate a more conversational, vernacular idiom, it is becoming acceptable to use words that directly transcribe sound. According to Ong, written communication is based on the eye and oral communication is based on the ear (1982), but orality is always, to some extent, present in written communication because, in order for written text to make sense, the reader has to internally reconvert it to oral form. An analysis of the modal configuration of screen-based personal correspondence reveals an emerging tendency for screen-based correspondents to use text aurally (appealing to the ear rather than the eye). In the highly formalised mode of paper-based letters, written elements of oral discourse such as rhythm, intonation and the onomatopoeic quality of words were ironed out as individual voice was neutralised. However, a modal analysis of screen-based personal correspondence reveals that sounds are breaking through the confines of inscription – for example, ‘BLARGH!’, ‘Grrrr’, ‘Mwahh – mwahh – mwahh’, ‘Grrrl’, ‘eeeeek’, ‘mmmmm’, ‘duh!’, ‘sheesh’ and ‘see you reeeeeeeal soon lady!’ This modal reemphasis on orality is mediating a number of subtle changes in usage; for example, conventions like apostrophes are becoming redundant because there is an increasing degree of confidence that when the reader orally reconstitutes the text the sense will be clear.

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen, the sequencing and pace of interactions influences meaning-making in a number of subtle ways (2001). Handwriting (and typewriting) was essentially a slow, private, reflective activity carried out in a linear sequence. It required intense concentration because the writer could not rewrite and rearrange the text without the process of revision and reworking being visible to the reader. The move from paper to screen has allowed personal correspondence to be a more impulsive activity, not only in terms of composition but also in terms of temporal sequencing, where increased and accelerated feed-back loops are decreasing the communication gap between sender and receiver. A number of theorists have written about the perceptual significance of this ‘gap’ (Eisenstein 1979, Poster 1994). Eisenstein claims that the ‘gap’ enables the sender to privately compose, and the receiver to consider and judge the words of the other ‘without his or her overbearing presence’ (1979: 61). She claims that this hiatus in time has privileged the rhetoric of detached neutrality associated with the controlled, carefully composed, highly mannered interaction associated with high literacy. The reduction of this gap, as is occurring in the rapid feedback loops of screen interaction, is leading to a reassessment of the desirability of this authorial refinement. Whereas in the paper-based medium intense emotions were considered rather distasteful, shrill and uncouth, in screen-based personal correspondence there is acceptance of the more direct, subjective idiom, and the raised voice. Online correspondents freely engage in more authentic, blunt, personal encounters. The pressure to respond more rapidly is leading to permission to respond more forcefully, in a less controlled way and a greater acceptance of a more agonistically toned (Ong 1982) style of communication. It may offend our sensibilities but it is occurring more frequently.

Conclusion

We are in a process of transition in our beliefs about what constitutes ‘good’ and high-level literacy. The tools and the rules of written correspondence are changing. This paper has examined how our perception of what is appropriate in personal correspondence is shaped by the material properties of our communication tools. In other words, the physical form of communication tools such as Twitter, emails and texts is influencing our communication values. While a number of the residual features of paper-based personal correspondence are carrying over into screen-based communication, these residual overlaps are rapidly reducing as new social tools change the form of communication and the cohort of communicators.

Far from being lazy and illiterate, the emerging screen-based correspondents are highly motivated to communicate, and effective and appropriate in their performance of literate communication. Disturbingly for many of us, our taken-for-granted assumptions about what constitutes good literate practice are being revealed as just the conventions of our age. While we may be prepared to intellectually accept this, are we prepared, as educators and academics, to allow these emerging ideas about real world writing to influence or guide our daily teaching and writing practice?

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